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CONTENTS

Editorial

1. Revisiting Ochre Coloured Pottery Culture in India with Special Reference to Southern Region 1-7
– *Nazim Husain Al Jafri*
2. Dining Norms, Customs and Etiquettes in the Delhi Sultanate 8-15
– *Fazila Shahnawaz*
3. Kalinjar Fort : An Archaeological survey 16-34
– *Vinod Kumar Singh*
4. Typological Study of Domes in Islamic Architecture of North India 35-44
– *Asif Ali*
5. Evolution of Calligraphic Art 45-47
– *Neema Ahmad*
6. A Study of trade and commerce between India and the Roman World from 200 BC to 300 AD. 48-55
– *Irfan Ahmed*
7. Sarojini Naidu and Women's Suffrage in Colonial India 56-68
– *Rakhi Chaudhary*

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DINING NORMS, CUSTOMS AND ETIQUETTES IN THE DELHI SULTANATE

Fazila Shahnawaz*

Socio-cultural functions variously held on different occasions, hosted by the Sultans and the nobles marked the basis of the community life of the Sultanate period. Among them feast was a formal dinner attended by the nobles, dignitaries and prominent persons of the state. These feasts not only popularized delicacies rather set cultural norms, etiquettes and dinning manners. Of the Indo-Persian literature only few sources contains a somewhat detailed list of the dietary habits, varieties of food dishes served at the dining carpet and the etiquettes the guests were expected to observe while taking their meal. Amir Khusrau and Ibn Battuta, among other contemporaries, provide us the descriptions of the royal feasts, manner in which food was served and the etiquettes observed. They further highlight the customary behaviour of the Sultans of Delhi and their nobles at the dining carpet. Thus, evidences show that the dining etiquettes became the ceremonial code of the Sultanate society.

The guests were received in the banquet hall with due respect and humility.¹ Food and drinks were served to the guests in the prescribed manner. First of all various types of *sherbets* and juices were served to them. Then different types of breads, meat and cereal dishes were served as the main course followed by the desserts or sweet dishes. At last, *fugqa* (a kind of drink made of water and barley and of dried grapes) was offered. As per prescribed custom, *pan* (betel-leaves) was offered to the guests at the end of the meal.² Sometimes perfumes and flowers were also brought for the guests at the end.¹

* Centre of Advanced Study, Department of History, A.M.U., Aligarh-202002.

¹ Isami, *Futuh-us-Salatin*, ed. A. S. Usha, Madras, 1948, pp. 313-314; Eng. tr., Agha Mahdi Husain, *Futuh-us-Salatin or Shahnama-i-Hind*, Vol. II, Bombay, 1977, pp. 490-491.

² Amir Khusrau, *Qiran-us-Sadain*, ed. Maulavi Muhammad Ismail, Aligarh, 1918, pp. 183-185; S. H. Askari, 'Khusrau's Works as Sources of Social History', in *Amir*

Barani's account of Balban shows that etiquettes of Central information about the Khwarizm Shah from under him before the banquet hall was embroidered carpets with curtains of zar threads) hanging artificial trees made

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¹ Amir Khusrau
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Din, Vol. I, D
Shahi, p. 8;
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² Zia Barani,
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³ Ibn Battuta
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Ateet; No. 1/Vol

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Barani's account of the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban shows that the Sultan emulated the dining etiquettes of Central Asia and Persia. He collected information about the banquets organized by Sultan Khwarizm Shah from the senior nobles who had served under him before their migration to India. Thus, the banquet hall was luxuriously decorated with embroidered carpets and colourful floorings were spread with curtains of *zarbaft* (expensive silk woven with gold threads) hanging all around. The rows were made by artificial trees made of silk of different colours.²

Contemporary accounts classified dinner into two: the 'Private' and the 'Public' dinner usually served at the royal palace and were attended by *maliks*, *khans*, *amirs* and other dignitaries.³

The first type was known as 'Private meal' and the second type was a 'Public meal'. Ibn Battuta records the etiquettes and ceremonial codes observed at private meal in which Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq invited his chosen relatives, *khans*, *maliks*, and *amirs* as well as

Khusrau Memorial Volume, Government of India, Delhi, 1975, pp. 147-149.

- 1 Amir Khusrau, *Qiran-us-Sadain*, pp. 183-185; Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, Eng. tr. H. A. R. Gibbs, *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, Vol. III, Delhi, 1993, p. 670; Isami, *Futuh-us-Salatin*, pp. 481-482; Rizqullah Mushtaqi, *Waqiat-e-Mushtaqi*, ed. I. H. Siddiqui, Rampur, 2002, pp. 5-6; Niamatullah, *Tarikh-i-Khan Jahani wa Makhzan-i-Afghani*, ed. S. M. Imam al-Din, Vol. I, Dacca, 1960, p. 140; Ahmad Yadgar, *Tarikh-i-Shahi*, p. 8; Nizamuddin Ahmad, *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, pp. 151-152; Abul Qasim Ferishta, *Tarikh-i-Ferishta*, Nawal Kishore Edition, Lucknow, 1865, p. 174; A. Halim, *History of the Lodi Sultans of Delhi*, pp. 16-17; I. H. Siddiqui, *Delhi Sultanate: Urbanization and Social Change*, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 69-70;
- 2 Zia Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, d. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Aligarh, 2005, p. 32.
- 3 Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, Eng. tr. Agha Mahdi Husain, Baroda, 1976, pp. 64; *Masalik*, Eng. tr., Spies, p. 33; Al-Qalqashandi, *Subh-ul-A'sha*, Eng. tr. Otto Spies, *An Arab Account of India in the 14th Century*, (Being a translation of the chapters on India), Aligarh, 1935, p. 72; I. H. Siddiqui, 'Food Dishes and the Catering Profession in Pre-Mughal India', *Islamic Culture*, vol. 59, no. 2, 1985, p. 126. Balban also introduced the practice of taking his daily meals along with the *Ulama* and *Danishmands*. See, Barani, *Tarikh*, p. 46.

other high dignitaries. He records that it was the habit of the Sultan to eat along with those who were present and those whom he called for the purpose. These nobles who attended this feast were *amirs* of household, the special *amirs*, *amir-i-hajib* (the head chamberlain), Sultan's paternal cousin, Imadul Mulk Sartez and the *amir-i-majlis* (master of ceremonies) and those out of *aizza*(relatives) and great *amirs* whom he wanted to honour. Being the *qazi* of Delhi, Ibn Battuta was present in almost all the private banquets of Sultan and noticed that dignitaries attended these banquets were not more than twenty in number. The food was served in a large Council hall to celebrate the private feast.¹

Whereas, unlike Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Sultan Bahlol Lodi used to take his meals with everyone who happened to be in the company with him.² Further, a change is being noticed during the period of Sultan Sikandar Lodi. It is recorded that seventeen men, including *ulama* and nobles were constantly accompanied the Sultan Sikandar in his private meal. It was the custom that these men, after washing their hands, seated themselves in front of the Sultan, who was himself on his *diwan*. A large chair was then placed near the royal *diwan* and different dishes were placed on it. The Sultan took food from the dishes which were also placed before his companions, but none of them partook of it in the royal presence. They remained in their seats and when the Sultan had finished his food, they carried away their plates. They either handed them over to their servants or ate them.³

Ibn Battuta minutely observed seating arrangements and the manner in which varieties of dishes were served to the guests. The names of the guests were recorded and to avoid any sort of mismanagement, the seats were

¹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, p. 669; Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, p. 64; Abdur Rashid, *Society and Culture in Medieval India*, Calcutta, 1969, p. 75; Ishwari Prasad, *Qaranuh Turks in India*, Allahabad, 1936, pp. 302-303; K. M. Ashraf, *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan*, Delhi, 1971, pp. 227-228; Siddiqui, *FoodDishes*, p. 126; K. A. Nizami, *Royalty in Medieval India*, New Delhi, 1997, p. 95

² Mushtaqi, *Waqiat*, p. 10.

³ Mushtaqi, *Waqiat*, p. 62; Ahmad Yadgar, *Taraikh-i-Shahi*, pp. 41-42; Abdullah, *Tarikh-i-Daudi*, pp. 35-36; Nizami, *Royalty*, p. 96.

allotted to every one. Accordingly, as per *hakims*, *sharifs* and *amirs* places at the pulpit *simat* (dining car) relatives, great records the seat. Courtiers were on *mimbar*.²

When all the bearers) brought drunk before each *bismilalh* by the placed before each of another person drink at the end of the Indian custom on the trays supervising the guests and the Sultan fixed his favourite nobles kitchen to the honour any banquet. He him. On reception had performed on his left hand the ground. noble and the one present

¹ Ibn Battuta

² Isami, *Fe*

³ Ibn Battuta

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⁴ Ibn Battuta *Qaranuh* pp. 22 *Royalty*

⁵ Ibn Battuta

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K. A. Nizami,
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1/Jan. - June, 2017

allotted to every person according to the list. Accordingly, as per the arrangements the *qazis*, *khatibs*, *hakims*, *sharifs* and chief *amirs* were assigned privileged places at the public dinner and sat at the head of the *simat* (dining carpet). These were followed by Sultan's relatives, great *amirs* and other people.¹ Isami also records the seating arrangement at the assembly hall. Courtiers were ordered to sit on the left and right of the *mimbar*.²

When all the guests sat down, the *shurbadar* (cup-bearers) brought candy-water in precious vessels. It was drunk before eating the food but after pronouncement of *bismilalh* by the chamberlains (*hajib*). A set of dishes was placed before each person. No one shared from the plate of another person. *Fuqqa* or barely-water was served to drink at the end of the meal. Then in accordance with the Indian custom, betel and areca nuts were distributed on the trays.³ Finally, the chief *amir* who was supervising the feast did homage followed by all the guests and then they left the hall.⁴ On that occasion, the Sultan fixed a number of trays of cooked food for his favourite nobles which were sent directly from the royal kitchen to their houses.⁵ Whenever Sultan wanted to honour any noble, he invited that person to this royal banquet. He took a plate, puts bread on it and gave it to him. On receiving the plate from Sultan, the said person had performed the prescribed etiquette, placed the plate on his left hand and bowed with his right hand touching the ground. Sometimes Sultan sent meal to absentee noble and the later too, wherever he be, bowed like the one present and sat down to eat it along with his

¹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, pp. 669-671.

² Isami, *Futuh-us-Salatin*, pp. 433-434.

³ Ibn Battuta describes the rituals that were followed during formal meals. He tells us that when the guest finished eating, a cradle in the shape of container (with four legs and upper part woven of palm fiber) was placed in front of the honored guests. Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, pp. 435-437; 670-671.

⁴ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, pp. 669-671; Ishwari Prasad, *Qaranuh Turks*, pp. 302-303; Ashraf, *Life and Conditions*, pp. 227-228; Siddiqui, *Food Dishes*, p. 126; Nizami, *Royalty*, p. 96; Siddiqui, *Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 70-71.

⁵ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, pp. 680-681.

companions.¹ Moreover, under the Lodis, dishes were also sent regularly from the royal kitchen to every person attached to the royal court. It was the practice that when a noble was favoured by the Sultan with anything, food or dress, cash or kind, he continued to receive the favour constantly without any change till the end of Sultan's reign.²

However, public meal was organized with great planning and care. The dining etiquettes and the manner observed at the public dinner were also observed in great detail by Ibn Battuta. It is said that public dinner was held in the council hall. The food from the royal kitchen was brought out by the palace officers in procession preceded by the *naqibs* (chief palace officers) and his subordinates who called out *bismillah*. The head of the *naqibs* and his subordinate walked in front of them carrying a golden and silver mace respectively and entered into the banquet hall. As soon as they entered the fourth gate, all the guests stood up from their seats and none remained seated except the Sultan. Then the food dishes were served on the dining carpet and then the accompanied *naqibs* stood up in a row while their *amir* (chief) stood right in front of them. As per the tradition, the *amir* of *naqibs* then delivered a speech, praising the reigning Sultan and then paid homage, bowing down before the Sultan in obeisance. Similarly all the subordinate *naqibs* and other officials, who were present in the hall, paid their homage to the Sultan. Again as per custom during the speech of the *amir* of *naqibs* (*naqib-un-nuqaba*) in praise of the reigning Sultan, nobody was allowed to speak, move or quit his place and quietly stood up at their respective places until the address was over. After the chief *Amir*, another speech was followed by his deputy (*naib*) who also paid his respects which was respectfully followed second time by all the assemble people. Then all the people took their seats. It is worth mentioning that the

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The dining carpet it, before each person start taking meal) called out *bismillah* they paid homage to in a prescribed manner behind the dinnin and paid homage to he may be. All the paid homage to the referred that hom the bowing of the eating food, getting the *hajib*. Again a whereupon they earlier and separately finishing the banquet

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¹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, p. 669; Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, p. 64; Rashid, *Society and Culture*, p. 75; Ishwari Prasad, *Qaranuh Turks*, pp. 302-303; Ashraf, *Life and Conditions*, pp. 227-228; Siddiqui, *Food Dishes*, p. 126; Nizami, *Royalty*, p. 95.

² Mushtaqi, *Waqiat*, p. 62; Eng. tr., pp. 63-64; Ahmad Yadgar, *Taraikh-i-Shahi*, pp. 41-42; Abdullah, *Tarikh-i-Daudi*, pp. 35-36; Nizami, *Royalty*, p. 96.

¹ Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, pp. 64-65; Rashid, *Society and Culture*, pp. 75-96.

² Ibn Battuta, *Food Dishes*, p. 126.

Ateet; No. 1/Vol.

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clerks deputed at the gates make entry not only of the guests rather than of the arrived foods also. Although Sultan knew this arrival but accordingly report was delivered to the Sultan through the sons of Malik. The Sultan, then, appointed a leading *amir* to supervise this feast and distribution of food.¹

The dining carpet was spread and dishes were put on it, before each person, but the guests have to wait (to start taking meal) for the signal from the *hajib*, who called out *bismillah* loudly. Before the announcement, they paid homage to the Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq in a prescribed manner. The *hajib* (chamberlain) stood behind the dinning carpet, before the food was served and paid homage in the direction to the Sultan wherever he may be. All those who were present at the banquet paid homage to the Sultan simultaneously. Ibn Battuta referred that homage consisted in bending the head like 'the bowing of the prayers'. Thereafter, the guests started eating food, getting the signal of *bismillah* loudly from the *hajib*. Again after the meal, *hajib* called out *bismillah*, whereupon they stand up and did homage as they did earlier and separated. This was the signal of the finishing the banquet.²

In the absence of the Sultan, certain dining etiquettes were performed by the host and guests. Ibn Battuta gives the details that when he arrived at Delhi, he paid a visit to the royal palace. Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq was away at that time. In the absence of the Sultan, dinner was served to the nobles on the same pattern at the palace of Sultan's mother Makhduma Jahan. After offering prescribed etiquettes of paying respect and presenting gifts, guests were instructed to sit down in an arcade of the palace. The chief of the guests was allotted prominent place. Then food was served on the same pattern in two tables, with two rows of guests at each table. Head of the groups presented at the meal sat at the head of each row. When they all went forward to the tables, the chamberlains and *naqibs* did homage, and same was done by them all. Accordingly, *sherbet*

uta, *Rehla*, p.
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ah, *Tarikh-i-*

¹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, pp. 669-670; Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, pp. 65-66; Isami, *Futuh-us-Salatin*, pp. 433-434; Rashid, *Society and Culture*, p. 75; Nizami, *Royalty*, pp. 95-96.

² Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, pp. 607-608; Siddiqui, *Food Dishes*, p. 124; Siddiqui, *Delhi Sultanate*, p. 69.

(drink) was brought first. As per custom, the chamberlain called out *bismillah* and then the guests start eating. After food, as usual, the barley-water and betel leaves were served. In the end, all guests were given silken robes of honour and other gifts. Again *bismillah* was called out by the chamberlain followed by the homage paid by all.¹

The nobles emulated the Sultans in hosting feasts and observed the royal dining etiquettes at their dining carpets. Malik Imad-ul-Mulk Rawat-i-Arz invited the officials of the *Diwan-i-Arz* every year and presented robes and twenty thousand *tankahs* to everyone. Different varieties of food, many varieties of *sherbets*, *fugga* and *pan* (*tambul*) were served to the guests in the royal manner. All the guests including *navisindas*, *sahmul-hashm*, *naibs*, *chaush*, *naqibs*, *naibAriz-i-Mamalik* and other *amirs* were served food at the dining carpet. Following the royal tradition he used to send the meal from the dining carpet to his officials who could not attend the feast.² Ibn Battuta records the manner in which food was served to the guests at dining carpet of the noble. As usual, before the meal, *sherbet* (drink) was served in precious vessels in the royal manner. Here too, the chamberlain loudly pronounced *bismilalh*, signaling the guests to start their meal. After meal, barely-water and areca nuts were served in accordance with the customary practice of the period. Finally, *bismillah* was again pronounced loudly by the chamberlains, which altered the guests. Thus, they all stood up and paid homage in the direction of the Sultan before leaving the place.³

During Lodi period, the host noble rushed to the gate to receive the guests. He took all the nobles to his *Diwan-khana* (private hall) and ordered his *vakils* (officers) and servants to serve them food. Ewers and jugs of water were brought to wash the hands of the guests. They first served bread and *kabab* as the starter then other dishes were served to them. Then the servants came with ewers and jugs of water, and after

¹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, pp. 736-737; Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, p. 121; Nizami, *Royalty*, p. 87

² Barani, *Tarikh*, pp. 115-116; K. A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics*, New Delhi, 2002, p. 159.

³ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Vol. III, pp. 607-608; Siddiqui, *Food Dishes*, pp. 124-125.

their hands were washed. The food from the second course was served beaf-soup and before each guest a roasted meat of cast non-noble guests to a few hundred persons served. In the evening preparations were prepared while single sweets and others. In short a few castrated goats and preparations were served on the carpet. In the evening sweetmeats were served. When the aforesaid food of plain rice, sweets and the dining carpet was served twelve seers of meal for two guests. In the evening for two hours. In the evening leaves and perfumes were put on the carpet, their foot was washed with the food. They were satisfied.

However, the period start with according to rank (sherbets) followed ended with distribution (custom) and per custom.

¹ Mushtaqi, Abdullah, T

Ateet; No. 1/Vol.

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/Jan. - June, 2017

their hands were washed, the servants began to serve the food from the second kitchen of the noble. First they served beef-soup and then placed a roasted *dumba* before each guest as per the custom of the Afghans. The roasted meat of castrated goat was placed before other non-noble guests too. This arrangement was made for a few hundred persons. Thereafter, varieties of soups were served. In the end two different types of sweet preparations were placed before every important person, while single sweet preparation was brought before others. In short a few hundreds of roasted *dumbas* and castrated goats along with hundred types of sweet preparations were brought three times to the dining carpet. In the same way the *pakwan-i-Hindi* and sweetmeats were served for the non-vegetarian guests. When the aforesaid dishes had been served, the dishes of plain rice, sweet rice and salted rice were brought to the dining carpet. The jugs containing about ten or twelve seers of milk were placed with two spoons, each for two guests. In short, guests continued to take food for two hours. In the end they were served with betel leaves and perfumes. At last as the guests left the dining carpet, their footmen were brought in and were served the food. They also took their meal to their full satisfaction.¹

However, the dining etiquettes in the Sultanate period start with the sitting arrangements, often in rows according to ranks of the nobles, and then serving *fuqqa* (*sherbets*) followed by main dishes, in varieties, and ended with distribution of betel leaf (according to Indian custom) and perfume in accordance with the Muslim custom.

¹ Mushtaqi, *Waqiat*, pp. 148-149; Eng. tr. pp. 162-164; Abdullah, *Tarikh-i-Daudi*, pp. 161-163.